**Promoting Professional Development**

***From “Evaluations that Help Teachers Learn,” Education Leadership, December 2010/January 2011***

In addition to the need to ensure teacher quality, there's another purpose of teacher evaluation: to promote professional learning. Teacher evaluation typically serves this more developmental purpose through professional conversations between teachers and colleagues who observe in their classrooms and between teachers and supervisors following formal or informal observations.

A commitment to professional learning is important, not because teaching is of poor quality and must be "fixed," but rather because teaching is so hard that we can always improve it. No matter how good a lesson is, we can always make it better. Just as in other professions, every teacher has the responsibility to be involved in a career-long quest to improve practice.

Two in One

The challenge is merging these two purposes of teacher evaluation. Educators need to create procedures that yield valid and reliable results—that is, that satisfy the legitimate demands for quality assurance while promoting professional learning. In truth, the demands are somewhat different. A system to ensure quality must be valid, reliable, and defensible—these are "hardsounding" qualities—whereas a system designed to promote professional learning is likely to be collegial and collaborative—these are much "softer-sounding" qualities.

Until recently, educators' attempts at merging quality assurance with professional learning have taken the form of enhancing evaluators' skills using techniques like clinical supervision and cognitive coaching. These are valuable skills and worth learning, but they are insufficient. The profession is better served when the requirements for these two purposes are embedded in the design of the systems themselves.

Getting from Here to There

We can get a clue as to the nature of this problem if we consider the typical observation, supervision, and evaluation process in use in most schools. The scenario proceeds as follows: The administrator goes to the classroom and watches a lesson, takes notes, goes away and writes up the notes, and then returns and tells the teacher about the lesson (what was good, what the teacher could improve). Most observations are a variation on this theme.

It's important to note that in this scenario, the administrator is doing all the work; the teacher is completely passive. (The teacher has, of course, taught the lesson, but the teacher contributes nothing to the observation itself.) So it's not surprising that teachers don't find the process valuable or supportive of their learning. The process violates everything we know about learning— that learning is done by the learner through a process of active intellectual engagement.

If we want teacher evaluation systems that teachers find meaningful and from which they can learn, we must use processes that not only are rigorous, valid, and reliable, but also engage teachers in those activities that promote learning—namely self-assessment, reflection on practice, and professional conversation.

We can modify the traditional observation scenario to accomplish these aims. A revised process—like the one Carla was so enthusiastic about at the beginning of this article—might look like this:

The administrator goes to the classroom, watches a lesson, and takes notes on all aspects of the lesson: what the teacher says and does, what the students say and do, the appearance of the classroom, and so on.

The administrator gives a copy of his or her notes to the teacher.

The administrator analyzes the notes against the evaluative criteria and levels of performance.

The teacher reflects on the lesson using the observer's notes and assesses the lesson against the evaluative criteria and levels of performance. The teacher will probably, as result of this reflection, identify aspects of his or her teaching to strengthen, and that teacher will reach these conclusions without prompting from the principal. Of course, the principal can always point things out, but when the teacher reflects on a lesson before the post-observation conference, he or she will frequently be as critical as the principal would have been.

The teacher and the administrator discuss the lesson. The teacher puts the lesson into context for the administrator, and together they decide on the teacher's strengths and areas for growth. Naturally, the administrator wasn't in the classroom the previous day and can't be familiar with all the issues that the teacher must address. So the teacher might describe a particular student's learning challenges, and the principal might suggest a different approach. But they conduct the conversation in light of their shared understanding of what constitutes good teaching.

**Two Challenges**

**The Need for Trained Evaluators**

A credible system of teacher evaluation requires higher levels of proficiency of evaluators than the old checklist, "drive-by" observation model. Evaluators need to be able to assess accurately, provide meaningful feedback, and engage teachers in productive conversations about practice.

In our experience with the Framework for Teaching, members of the Danielson Group have trained hundreds of observers all across the United States and in other countries as well. Our findings have been somewhat humbling; even after training, most observers require multiple opportunities to practice using the framework effectively and to calibrate their judgments with others.

Most administrator preparation programs don't teach such skills; administrators must acquire them on the job. But when they do learn them, administrators can be the instructional leaders that schools so urgently need.

A training program for evaluators—one that uses the Framework for Teaching—consists of several steps:

Participants familiarize themselves with the structure of the Framework for Teaching, which consists of four domains of teaching responsibility (planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities); 22 components that describe those domains; and two to five elements that fully describe each component.

Participants learn how to recognize the sources of evidence for each component and element. For example, Domain 2 (the classroom environment) and Domain 3 (instruction) are demonstrated primarily in the classroom, whereas Domain 1 (planning and preparation) and Domain 4 (professional responsibilities) depend on artifacts, such as teachers' techniques for communicating with families (for example, newsletters or handouts for back-to-school night) or logs of professional development activities.

Participants learn how to interpret the evidence against the rubrics for each component's levels of performance. For example, in assessing whether a classroom creates an environment of respect and rapport, observers would need to note whether student interactions are characterized by conflict, sarcasm, or put-downs (an unsatisfactory rating for the teacher); whether students, in general, refrain from disrespecting one another (a basic rating); whether student interactions are, in general, polite and respectful (a proficient rating); or whether students demonstrate genuine caring for one another and monitor one another's treatment of peers (a distinguished rating).

Participants learn how to calibrate their judgments against those of their colleagues. For example, one observer might interpret interactions in a classroom as representing basic performance, whereas another might see them as proficient. There are many reasons for such differences. One observer might simply have missed something important in the classroom, or the two observers might have slightly different ways of interpreting their evidence. But whatever the reason, it's important they discuss the situation so that they can, in the future, make consistent judgments.

**Finding Time for Professional Conversations**

A second challenge for administrators is finding time to conduct meaningful observations and engage in professional conversations about practice. However, even in the traditional system, principals need to devote time to the evaluation process—despite the fact that it often produces few benefits. In the words of an educator with whom we've worked, "It doesn't take any longer to do this process well than to do it poorly, so why not do it well?" What better use of a school leader's time than to engage teachers in conversations about practice?

Evaluator-teacher conversations, when conducted around a common understanding of good teaching—and around evidence of that teaching— offer a rich opportunity for professional dialogue and growth. We can't create more hours in the day, but careful setting of priorities and judicious scheduling of both observations and conferences can make the best use of the time available. Moreover, unless a district's negotiated agreement forbids it, brief and informal drop-in observations yield plenty of information for reflective conversation and require far less time than formal observations do.

**A Thoughtful Approach**

Abundant evidence from both informal observation and formal investigation indicates that a thoughtful approach to teacher evaluation—one that engages teachers in reflection and self-assessment—yields benefits far beyond the important goal of quality assurance. Such an approach provides the vehicle for teacher growth and development by providing opportunities for professional conversation around agreed-on standards of practice.